

# Inter-faith Rituals: Rebuilding the Secular Nation-state from the Margins

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## **Abstract:**

Is it possible to sustain secular character of a secular nation-state when the union government consciously weaponizes religion for its majoritarian and electoral politics? The present study explores how people positioned at the margins of a nation-state can reconceptualise the discourse of secularism to rebuild and sustain the secular nation-state. The study focuses on the significance of the inter-faith ritual organised by Shaheen Bagh protestors during their protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed implementation of all-India National Register of Citizens (NRC) as they jeopardise universalistic and secular idea of citizenship as defined in the Constitution of India.

To counter the government's assault on secularism, Shaheen Bagh protestors organised an inter-faith ritual to demonstrate equal and harmonious co-existence of different religions in a religiously diverse society like India. Religion is thus highlighted as a binding and harmonising force. The study also highlights that to build and sustain a secular nation-state a sound constitutional framework is important, but not sufficient. In a religiously diverse society like India, it is crucial to consciously build a secular value system within people so that the two movements: centre to the margins and margins to the centre (read: margins: bottom, centre: up)—can work in tandem to sustain the secular nation-state. Otherwise, both the nation and the state will be susceptible to the exploitation of religious sentiments for electoral or ideological gains.

**Keywords:** Shaheen Bagh protest, secularism, religion, Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Citizens, inter-faith rituals.

India's 2014 Lok Sabha<sup>1</sup> elections was won by the Bhartiya Janata Party led National Democratic Alliance. The invitation of the Indian government of the 2015 Republic Day celebration commemorating the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the enforcement of the Constitution of India included the original preamble of 1950.<sup>2</sup> Three founding principles secular, socialist and integrity “made explicit”<sup>3</sup> in the preamble by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976, were thus absent from the copy of the preamble published on the invitation.<sup>4</sup> The exclusion is noteworthy. In 1973, the Supreme Court established the preamble as the basic structure of the Constitution and thus restricted the revision *only* to additions.<sup>5</sup> By authorising an older version of the amended preamble, the government sought to strategically exclude the three key words; it is crucial to emphasise that secular is one of them.

The invitation also quotes the present prime minister's Narendra Modi's words stating the importance of “people's participation”<sup>6</sup> for a successful democracy. To complement the quote, the invitation features a picture of a group of people representing Indians. Significantly, although the people represent India's regional and cultural diversity, they all visibly belong to one religion, and that is Hinduism. A question arises: what do the absence of the word secular and the religious homogeneity of the people representing Indians on the new government's first formal invitation of the Republic Day suggest? Given the privilege of the rear view, it seems safe to argue that the invitation articulates the government's intention to undermine secularism as a defining principle of the Constitution and instead establish Hindu nationalism as the key guiding ideology of the Indian nation-state.

It is apparent from the passing of Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) and the announcement of the implementation of all-India National Register of Citizens (NRC) by the union home minister in December 2019. The act adds the following provision to the Citizenship Act, 1955: “(...) any (religiously persecuted) person belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian community from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan, who entered into the India on or before (December 31, 2014) (...) shall not be treated as illegal migrant for the purpose of this Act;”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lok Sabha (the House of the People) is the lower house of India's bicameral Parliament.

<sup>2</sup> Mustafa, Faizan. 2018. “Preamble of Indian Constitution and its Use in Constitutional Interpretation,” Nalsar University of Law, [Preamble of Indian Constitution and Its use in Constitutional interpretation | Prof. Faizan Mustafa - YouTube](#) Also See Illustration 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* The phrase “made explicit” means that these principles were already part of the constitution. The secular principle, for example, is expressed in articles 25 to 28 as they guarantee freedom of religion.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See illustration 1.

<sup>7</sup> The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2019, [4109LS The Citizenship.p65](#), p. 2.

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and will “be eligible for naturalisation as Indian citizens within six years, rather than the stipulated (11 years) of residence in India.”<sup>8</sup> The bill has been widely criticized. It undermines the universal and religion-neutral idea of citizenship enshrined in the Constitution because: a) “it introduces religion as a marker of citizenship”<sup>9</sup>; and b) it excludes Muslims. The government has defended its stance by arguing that the three countries included in the act have Islam as the dominant religion<sup>10</sup> and therefore Muslims are not included. However, the government doesn’t acknowledge that Ahmadiyya, Hazaras, Shias and Rohingya are persecuted Muslim minorities in these countries.<sup>11</sup>

The Ministry of Home Affairs assures that the CAA will not affect an “Indian citizen in any way”<sup>12</sup>; however, its impact on them will be evident when seen in combination with the NRC. It was originally designed to address the issue of “undocumented migrants in Assam;”<sup>13</sup> the Modi government decided to introduce pan-India NRC;<sup>14</sup> thus “(opening) up the issue of citizenship for all Indians.”<sup>15</sup> The exercise entails creation of a national register of all Indian citizen; the citizens will thus be required to prove their citizenship on the basis of certain documents. Political scientist Niraja Jayal argues that the CAA and NRC should “be read (...) in the larger context of the (Modi) government’s policies towards (Muslims).”<sup>16</sup> The combination of CAA and NRC poses a threat of disenfranchising Muslims. Because NRC will “pave the way to statelessness and detention centres” for those who won’t have the necessary documents to prove their citizenship; and CAA will then be employed to grant citizenship to those who are “deemed acceptable *only on the grounds of their faith*.”<sup>17</sup> (author’s emphasis) Muslims excluded through NRC will thus be rendered stateless.

By defining Indian citizenship on the basis of religion, the bill jeopardises universalistic and secular idea of citizenship as defined in the Constitution. Jayal writes that that the Constituent

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<sup>8</sup> Yamini Aiyar. 2020. “Remaking the Idea of who is ‘Indian’”, Seminar India 725, [725 Yamini Aiyar, Remaking the idea of who is 'Indian' \(india-seminar.com\)](https://www.india-seminar.com/2020/725/yamini-aiyar-remaking-the-idea-of-who-is-indian.html)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> “Ministry of Home Affairs Answers Questions on Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019”, [CAA 2019\\_dec.pdf \(hcikl.gov.in\)](https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/CAA_2019_dec.pdf), pp. 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Yamini Aiyar. 2020. *Op. cit.* Also see, Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2021. *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Trans: Cynthia Schoch), Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 373.

<sup>12</sup> “Ministry of Home Affairs Answers Questions on Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019”, *Op.cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2021. *Op.cit.*, 374. Jayal, Niraja Gopal. 2019. “Faith-based citizenship: The Dangerous Path India is Choosing”, in *The India Forum* Issue November 1, 2019, [Faith-based Citizenship | The India Forum](https://www.theindiaforum.org/issue-november-1-2019). Assam, a north-eastern Indian state, have been experiencing “substantial in-migration from 1947 onwards, peaking in 1947.” The migrants are mostly from Bangladesh. Many of them through “networks of complicity and (...) profit” get illegal document to become Indian citizens.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Yamini Aiyar. 2020. *Op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Jayal, Niraja Gopal. 2019. “Faith-based citizenship: The Dangerous Path India is Choosing”, in *The India Forum* Issue November 1, 2019, [Faith-based Citizenship | The India Forum](https://www.theindiaforum.org/issue-november-1-2019)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Assembly adopted “the more enlightened modern civilised and democratic conception of Citizenship.”<sup>18</sup> “The Citizenship Act, 1955 gave a statutory basis to the idea of *jus soli* or citizenship by birth.”<sup>19</sup> The movement from *jus soli* to *jus sanguinis* and a recognition of “religious identity (...) as the basis of legal citizenship”<sup>20</sup> have been happening “slowly.”<sup>21</sup> However, the CAA and NRC mark a “foundational shift in the conception of Indian citizen”<sup>22</sup> because it’s a shift towards “a *jus sanguinis* or descent-based principle”<sup>23</sup> and privileging religion as a determining criterion for citizenship.<sup>24</sup> It will “in effect create two categories of potential citizens: those professing the Hindu and other ‘acceptable’ faiths<sup>25</sup>; and those professing Islam.”<sup>26</sup> The CAA and NRC therefore “have the potential of transforming India into a majoritarian polity with gradations of citizenship rights that undermine the constitutional principle of universal equal citizenship (...).”<sup>27</sup>

Importantly, a number of students from universities like Aligarh Muslim University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia initiated strong protests against the CAA and all-India NRC, which triggered a spate of protests throughout India. On December 15, 2019, protest started in Shaheen Bagh, a predominantly working-class Muslim neighbourhood in South Delhi. Shaheen Bagh which until then was an inconspicuous place, acquired national and international popularity not only because it was led by Muslim women and it became the face of anti-CAA and NRC protests, but primarily because its coherent political narrative and articulation opened the possibility of a counter-hegemonic discourse and thus posed a significant challenge to the government. An entire repertoire of innovative rituals<sup>28</sup> that the protestors employed to make the abstract constitutional principles accessible to the ordinary people played in role this process. The present paper discusses how the Shaheen Bagh protesters demonstrated and strove to re-establish the spirit of Indian secularism by organising an inter-faith ritual at the protest site.

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<sup>18</sup> Jayal, Niraja Gopal. 2019. *Op.cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Jayal informs that owing to exigencies posed by the situation in Assam in 1985 “an amendment in the provisions relating to the naturalisation in the Citizenship Act was introduced.” Additionally, “two amendments of 2004—one to the Citizenship Act and the other to the Rules under the Act”—marked a shift towards recognition of “religious identity (...) as the basis of legal citizenship.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> ‘Acceptable’ faiths here refer to other religions included in the CAA: Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Schechner, Richard. 2005. *Performance Theory*, Routledge, New York, p. 116. The term “ritual” here is used as defined by performance theorist Richard Schechner. He defines a ritual in terms of “efficacy”; it means that if “performance’s purpose is to effect transformations—to be efficacious,” it will be termed as a ritual.

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The designing of the ritual articulates its dialogical relationship with the principle of secularism enshrined in the Constitution of India (and popular liberal imagination). To put it differently, the ritual gets its legitimacy and potency from the Constitution as the former is designed within the constitutional framework. At the same time, the ritual also contributes to foreground and strengthen the secular spirit of India. To achieve this the protestors have redefined the role of religion and people. It is in response to the exigencies posed by the present context, and that is, the central government's assault on secularism. The chapter therefore also discusses an important development initiated by the Shaheen Bagh protestors; and that is people positioned at the margins are reconceptualising the discourse of secularism to rebuild and sustain the secular nation-state.

On the evenings of February 6 and 12<sup>29</sup>, 2020, the protestors of Shaheen Bagh organised a “unique multi-faith ceremony of Mantras, Hymns, Kirtans and Qirat.”<sup>30</sup> People practicing Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism and Islam were thus invited to perform recitations of the religious texts and rituals<sup>31</sup> of their respective religion. The design of the ritual reflects a clear purpose. It is succinctly captured in the title *Jashn-E-Ekta*; which literally means a celebration of unity. The program following the religious ritual elucidates that the religious unity is sought for a particular purpose and that is to create a peaceful nation. As the poster states, “Together, we will pledge for peace of our motherland.”<sup>32</sup>

Since the poster is published in English, the visual elements on the poster communicate the purpose of the ritual even to a non-English speaker. Any doubt one might have about the reference of the pronoun “we” in the forementioned program is clarified by the accompanying image of six heterosexual couples whose stylisation, i.e., costume and make-up, present them as representative of India's religious and cultural diversity. The colours that frame the contents of the poster evoke the image of the Indian national flag.<sup>33</sup> The viewer's perspective is thus framed as one is urged to register that the ritual is within the idea of India; idea that is enshrined in the Constitution. This is apparent from the following: one, while performing the Hindu ritual the picture of Ambedkar, who is considered to be the chief architect of the Constitution, is kept.<sup>34</sup> In making ritual offering

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<sup>29</sup> CAA Stir- Inter-faith Prayer to Uphold Values of the Preamble at Shaheen Bagh Protest Nears Month, 2020. *The Hindu*, [CAA stir: Inter-faith prayer to uphold values of Preamble as Shaheen Bagh protest nears month - The Hindu](#)

<sup>30</sup> See illustration 3. It is the poster of the inter-faith ritual organised on January 6, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> The word rituals in this case refers to religious rituals.

<sup>32</sup> As quoted in the poster of the inter-faith ritual. See Illustrations 3 and 4.

<sup>33</sup> See illustrations 3.

<sup>34</sup> “A Unique Anti-CAA Protest in Shaheen Bagh: an Expression of Sarv Dharm Sambhav”, 2020., *NDTV Shaheen Bagh में CAA का अनोखा विरोध, दिखा 'सर्व धर्म समभाव' का भाव - YouTube*

to Ambedkar, the spirit of the Constitution is invoked rather than a god. The former is foregrounded after the religious ceremony also as the “pledge for peace of our motherland” entailed the public reading of the Preamble.<sup>35</sup>

The ritual raises the following issues: one, the role of religion in building a secular nation-state; and second, the role of people in this process. These issues are clearly articulated in the central pictorial composition of the poster.<sup>36</sup> It is composed of three images: at its centre is the collage of the symbols of the above-mentioned religions; the image symbolises their equal status, peaceful co-existence and harmony among them. On its either side are mirror images of a picture which is popularly associated with the Indian independence movement. The image features a group of men, women and two children leaping forward with determination and a clear purpose. The man in the leading position holds the Indian national flag. The choice of this particular image is significant as the people featured in the image are all ordinary people. Compare this image with Deviprasad Roy Chowdhury’s sculpture “Gyarah Murti;” it represents the Dandi March led by Mahatma Gandhi in 1930, which is an extremely significant moment in the Indian independence struggle.<sup>37</sup> It’s a popular sculpture as its image is published on the former version of 500 Indian rupee note.<sup>38</sup> The sculpture’s composition and spirit are very similar to the image published on the poster. However, there is one major difference between the two; in the former the person leading the march is Gandhi. A question arises: what does the choice of an image which doesn’t feature Gandhi (read: a popular leader) suggest?

The question becomes particularly significant as the event draws from the tradition of fostering communal harmony through constructive programmes as formulated by Gandhi. He believed that “internal tensions should find their own resolutions.”<sup>39</sup> He perceived state as a “foreign body”<sup>40</sup> and was thus sceptical about its role in resolving communal tensions. Constructive programme for him was a means “to build up the nation from the very bottom upward.”<sup>41</sup> For him communal unity cannot be accomplished through political unity as it “may be imposed.”<sup>42</sup> Instead,

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<sup>35</sup> Anti-CAA Protests: Indian Citizens Show Act of Inter-Faith Harmony, 2020, *The News*, [Anti-CAA protests: Indian citizens show act of inter-faith harmony \(thenews.com.pk\)](https://www.thenews.com.pk)

<sup>36</sup> See Illustration 3.

<sup>37</sup> “Public Art: Sculptures by Deviprasad Roy Chowdhury Capture Key Moments in Indian History”, 2021, The Heritage Lab: Culture, Art, Museums, [Public Art: Sculptures by Deviprasad Roy Chowdhury capture key moments in Indian History \(theheritagelab.in\)](https://www.theheritagelab.in)

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Khosla, Madhav. 2020. *India’s Founding Moment: The Constitution of a Most Surprising Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 78.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. 1945. “Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place”, The Navajivan Trust, Microsoft Word - gandhiana-constprog.doc (jmu.edu), p. iii.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

he proposed the idea of creating “unbreakable heart unity.”<sup>43</sup> Since his speech on constructive programme was originally addressed to the members of the Indian National Congress, he urged them to “cultivate personal friendship”<sup>44</sup> and “have the same regard for the other faiths as he (a Congress member) has for his own.”<sup>45</sup> In the “Foreword” of the revised edition of his speech published in 1945, Gandhi envisioned an India where each Indian would participate wholeheartedly in the constructive programme.<sup>46</sup> He described it as a moment of “complete independence,”<sup>47</sup> meaning independence from the British colonial rule and also from communal disharmony and social evils like untouchability.

In post-independence India, building communal harmony through constructive programs was an important component of *Sarvodaya*, which means service to all humankind. It is a non-political vision of nation building formulated and proposed by Gandhi.<sup>48</sup> It was however not well received by the founding leaders of India for the following reasons: one, they argued that “it would create a power vacuum in the country,”<sup>49</sup> and second, leaders like Nehru and Ambedkar rejected the bottom-up approach of nation building and instead opted for a strong centralised state.<sup>50</sup> Building communal solidarity based on constructive programs thus remained a marginal idea; however, Gandhian political ideologues translated his conception of communal harmony into political secularism known *sarv dharm sambhava*.<sup>51</sup> It literally means that all the religions (majority or minority) will be treated equally by the state.<sup>52</sup> To actualise this principle, “the state must not identify with any religion; it must break all formal and legal ties with all the religions.”<sup>53</sup> It was formulated to curtail the possibility of inter-religious domination in a context where prospects of the domination of majoritarian religion was looming large.<sup>54</sup> In the popular imagination, *sarv dharm sambhava* is believed to be the form of secularism practiced in India.<sup>55</sup> It is this form of secularism that is evoked and celebrated in the interfaith ceremony in Shaheen

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* pp. iii – iv.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. iii

<sup>48</sup> Harris, Ishwar C. 1987. “Sarvodaya in Crisis: The Gandhian Movement in India Today,” in *Asian Survey*, Vol.27, No. 9, University of California Press, p. 1036.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> See, Khosla, Madhav. 2020. *op.cit.*, pp. 72-109.

<sup>51</sup> Bhargava, Rajeev. 2014. “Two Conceptions of Indian Secularism,” Distinguished Lecture by Prof. Rajeev Bhargava - YouTube

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Bagh. In fact, most of the media reports called it as “a *sarva dharma sambhava* ceremony.”<sup>56</sup> Significantly, political theorist Rajeev Bhargava argues that *sarva dharma sambhav* is one of the two dominant forms of secularism practiced in India; the other version of secularism is inscribed in the Constitution.<sup>57</sup> The main concern for the framers of the Constitution was to curtail the possibility of institutionalised religious domination, both inter-religious and intra-religious.<sup>58</sup> Bhargava terms this forms of secularism as “principled distance from all religion.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, the state may “engage positively” with religion and “engage negatively (to) hinder discriminately practices.”<sup>60</sup>

Additionally, the Constitution also adopted what political philosophers Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor term as “open liberal-pluralist model” of secularism.<sup>61</sup> It places “the demand of (religious) neutrality only upon institutions, *not* individuals.”<sup>62</sup> (Emphasis added). The latter is granted the freedom to express their religious affiliation even in the public sphere. Owing to the prominence of Max Weber’s thesis of the connection between modernity and the secularisation process, it was believed that the secular framework of the Constitution will be deepened due to the “forces of westernisation and modernisation at work in India (...).”<sup>63</sup> Political theorist Donald Smith in his book on Indian secularism published in 1963 thus predicted that there is a high probability that within twenty years from the publication of his book “many of India’s constitutional anomalies regarding the secular state will have disappeared.”<sup>64</sup>

The sound constitutional blueprint and expanding modernisation to build and sustain a liberal secular nation-state notwithstanding, secularism in India has faced a serious setback. Pressing concerns of Gandhi and most of the framers of the Constitution regarding the dominance of the majority religion and the communalisation of political processes to disenfranchise minority religious groups and thus undermining the formal equality of citizenship have become a reality. It is therefore important to explore the reasons that undermined India’s secular framework.

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<sup>56</sup> See for instance: ‘Sarva Dharma Sambhava at Shaheen Bagh amidst CAA Stir, 2020. *Deccan Herald*, ‘[Sarva dharma sambhava' at Shaheen Bagh amidst CAA stir | Deccan Herald](#), ‘Shaheen Bagh Holds Inter-Faith Ceremony Against CAA’ 2020. *The Wire*, [Shaheen Bagh Holds Inter-Faith Ceremony Against CAA \(thewire.in\)](#)

<sup>57</sup> Bhargava, Rajeev. 2014. *Op.cit.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> As quoted in, Jayal, Niraja Gopal. 2017. “Religion, Secularism and the State”, *Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies*, Global Centre for Pluralism, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Sen, Ronojoy. 2019. *Articles of Faith: Religion, Secularism and the Indian Supreme Court*, Oxford University Press, p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14. The anomalies refer to provisions like Muslim personal law.



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Jayal questions the neat positioning of state above society; where the state is conceived of as a neutral actor “benignly disposed towards, but equidistant from all religions.”<sup>65</sup> This understanding of secularism rests on “an implicit denial of the state’s embeddedness in society.”<sup>66</sup> The embeddedness of state within society came to the fore in the 1980s as religion functioned as a strong social force that shaped the working of the political process.<sup>67</sup> The Shah Bano case, along with the Babri Masjid issue, contributed significantly in undermining the universalistic secular aspirations of the state. To appease the Muslim constituents, who opposed the Supreme Court’s judgement on Shah Bano case and the Congress minister’s ‘secular’ speech, the government hastily introduced the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill. One of the main issues raised in the debate on the bill was “religion and politics in a secular state.”<sup>68</sup> The opponents of the bill raised concerns about its “unconstitutionality;”<sup>69</sup> it not only “contravened the duty of the state (...) to provide social justice and welfare”<sup>70</sup> to Muslim women, but more importantly, it undermined the secular principle inscribed in the preamble.<sup>71</sup> The government defended the bill by arguing that owing to the minority status of Muslims, their interests need to be safeguarded.<sup>72</sup> The government thus projected itself as the protector of minority identity, and therefore, expressed reservation in applying “the principle of equidistance”<sup>73</sup> which is central to concept of secularism inscribed in the Constitution.

The claims of the government notwithstanding, its conscious use of communal strategy is apparent from the way it appropriated the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which started in 1984 by the Hindu communalist groups, and decided to open the locks of the Babri Masjid so that Hindu devotees could worship at the disputed site as is believed to be the birth place of the Hindu god Ram.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, if Muslim Women’s Bill became a means to appease Muslim constituents; by simultaneous use of Hindu communal strategy enabled the Congress to retain its hold on the Hindu vote.<sup>75</sup> Owing to these developments, Political theorist Christophe Jafferlot observes that

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<sup>65</sup> Jayal, Niraja Gopal. 1999. *Democracy and the State: Welfare, Secularism and Development in Contemporary India*, Oxford University Press, Mumbai, p. 102.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Hasan, Zoya. 2018. “Minority Identity, State Policy and the Political Process” in *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities, and the State in India* (Ed. Zoya Hasan), Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, London, p. 67.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p. 124.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* p. 126.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 124 – 125.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 125.

<sup>74</sup> Hasan, Zoya. 2018. *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68

“the state no longer seemed to be above the religious division in society.”<sup>76</sup> In fact, the communal strategies adopted by the central government unleashed the Hindu nationalist movement. The latter seized this opportunity to mark an important shift in Indian politics as it mainstreamed exploiting, rather deepening religious cleavages, for electoral gains. The 1991 Lok Sabha Elections testifies to this shift as the creation of Ram temple on the Babri Masjid site at Ayodhya was an important part of BJP’s election manifesto.<sup>77</sup> Together with the RSS and the VHP<sup>78</sup>, BJP launched an aggressive campaign to mobilise Hindus and exploit religious appeal to garner votes; the campaign played a key role in increasing BJP’s vote share and consolidated it as the main opposition party at the centre.<sup>79</sup>

Significantly, after elections the discourse of secularism gained prominence because of the following reasons: first, since the ethno-nationalism was considered an aberrant, the BJP struggled to maintain its “integrity as a political party.”<sup>80</sup> The demolition of Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, by a mob of Hindutva cadres and the communal riots<sup>81</sup> that erupted after that forced the BJP to moderate its stance on religious politics and privilege “social and economic issues.”<sup>82</sup> Second, the demolition prompted the Congress government at the centre to adopt anti-communal measures to curtail Hindu nationalism.<sup>83</sup> Third, the economic liberalisation policy introduced in 1991 by the Congress government positioned economic policies at the centre of political debates.<sup>84</sup> Fourth, the moderate stance of BJP was particularly apparent in the Lok Sabha elections held in 1996, 1998 and 1999 as the BJP emerged as the largest party and needed alliances to form coalition government at the centre; however, the potential allies didn’t approve Hindu nationalism, and thus, for alliance building, the BJP was forced to soften its nationalist agenda.<sup>85</sup>

Although the moderate politics of the BJP during its tenure as the ruling party at the centre (1999-2004) and re-emergence of the Congress-led UPA government in both 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections re-established the secular state, the steady growth of the RSS and its affiliates at

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<sup>76</sup> Jafferlot, Christophe. 1996. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 369.

<sup>77</sup> BJP ELECTION MANIFESTO 1991.pdf, p. 323.

<sup>78</sup> VHP or Vishva Hindu Parishad is a Hindu right-wing organisation. It’s a part of the RSS and was formed in 1964 by M.S. Golwalkar and S.S. Apte.

<sup>79</sup> Jafferlot, Christophe. 1996. *op.cit.* p. 449.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 458 - 464. Riots erupted in Bombay, Surat, Bhopal etc.

<sup>82</sup> Wyatt, Andrew. 2000. “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: The BJP and the General and State Assembly Elections in India, 1999 - 2000”, *Asian Affairs*, 31: 3, p. 287.

<sup>83</sup> Jafferlot, Christophe. 1996. *op.cit.* p. 473.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Wyatt, Andrew. 2000. *op.cit.*, pp. 285 - 287.

the grassroots and the political model developed by Narendra Modi in Gujrat in his capacity as the state's chief minister from 2001 to 2014 posed a potent threat to the secular state.<sup>86</sup> With the launch of BJP's election campaign for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the two forces came together to dismantle the secular state. Consider for instance, the situation in Western Uttar Pradesh.

Political analysts Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar describe how in the 2000s, which they term as "a post-Ayodhya phase"<sup>87</sup>, a shift took place in the communal politics of Uttar Pradesh (UP). From violent state-wide riots, "a model of *institutionalised everyday communalism*" emerged.<sup>88</sup> (authors' emphasis). Central to the new model was: a) "sustained, every day grassroots mobilisation" activities of the local organisations affiliated to the Sangh Parivar; and b) inclusion of "lower castes to consolidate a *Maha-Hindu* identity."<sup>89</sup> The mobilization and consolidation of the "*Maha-Hindu* identity" was in relation to the clear demarcation and stigmatisation of Muslims.<sup>90</sup>

The resentment and anxieties caused due to deepening economic problems aggravated the communalisation process.<sup>91</sup> The agrarian crisis in Muzaffarnagar disrupted the harmonious relation between the Hindu Jat and Muslim peasants; this was exploited to polarise them on communal lines.<sup>92</sup> The situation started deteriorating in 2013 as the BJP started its "communally aggressive" election campaign in UP in April 2013.<sup>93</sup> *Mahapanchayats*<sup>94</sup> were employed as a potent platform for mass communal mobilisation; particularly significant for our discussion is the active participation of farmers in these events. In a video circulated widely on the internet, Naresh Tikait, the present president of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), is seen inciting Hindu Jats to unleash violence against Muslims.<sup>95</sup> These factors led to the outbreak of violent communal riots in Muzaffarnagar, and its surrounding areas, in September 2013. The BJP was thus able to consolidate and win Hindu Jat vote in UP.<sup>96</sup>

In January 2021, in midst of the struggle against the three farm laws passed by the central government in September 2020; Rakesh Tikait, one of the main leaders of the farmers' protest,

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<sup>86</sup> See, Jafferlot, Christophe. 2021. *Op.cit.*, pp. 31 – 73.

<sup>87</sup> Pai, Sudha, and Kumar, Sajjan. 2018. *Everyday Communalism: Riots in Contemporary Uttar Pradesh*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 196 – 200.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 209 – 210.

<sup>94</sup> *Mahapanchayats* mean Grand Village Council Meetings.

<sup>95</sup> Kshyap, Sunil. 2021. "Muzaffarnagar Riots and Legacy Issues: Rakesh Tikait's unlikely Rise to Farmer Leadership," *Caravan: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, January Issue, Muzaffarnagar riots and legacy issues: Rakesh Tikait's unlikely rise to farmer leadership (caravanmagazine.in)

<sup>96</sup> Pai, Sudha, and Kumar, Sajjan. 2018. *Op.cit.*, p. 207.

realised that the disunity among farmers caused due to the communal politics, particularly the riots in Muzaffarnagar, has weakened the farmers' political and bargaining power.<sup>97</sup> To build solidarity across religious lines, a *Mahapanchayat* was organised in which Naresh Tikait publicly apologised for the riots.<sup>98</sup> In the following months, the Tikait brothers conducted dialogues at grassroot level in Western UP to expose the communal politics of the BJP and encourage the farmers to foreground their famers' identity rather than religious or caste identity.<sup>99</sup> Owing to these efforts, Gulam Mohammad Jola, an influential Muslim farmers' leader who had left Muzaffarnagar after the riots, joined them in dismantling communal tension and rebuilding farmers identity.<sup>100</sup> The success of their efforts was apparent in the Muzaffarnagar *Mahapanchayat* organised by Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) on September 5, 2021.<sup>101</sup> Hindu Jat and Muslim farmers of Muzaffarnagar and its neighbouring districts worked together to organise it and support over a hundred thousand farmers who participated in event from different parts of India. Besides criticising the government for its attempt to corporatize agriculture by introducing the three farm laws, religious solidarity was the major theme as most of the speakers highlighted its significance.<sup>102</sup> For instance, Rakesh Tikait asserted, "They<sup>103</sup> will work to divide. We will work to Unite. Riots won't happen here."<sup>104</sup> Like Shaheen Bagh, a short, yet powerful interfaith tradition was revived to demonstrate and strengthen religious unity between Hindu Jat and Muslim farmers. The ceremony entailed chanting of religion-derived slogans of Hinduism and Islam alternatively;<sup>105</sup> the alternative chants articulated their inseparability.

The inter-faith ritual at Shaheen Bagh is an extremely important contribution in the discourse on secularism in contemporary India. The reasons are as follows: first, it redefines the role of religion as a binding and harmonising force in a situation when the government weaponizes it for majoritarian and electoral politics. Second, the ritual facilitates in understanding that to build and sustain a secular nation-state a sound constitutional framework is important, but not sufficient. In a religiously diverse society like India, it is crucial to consciously build a secular value

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<sup>97</sup> Kumar, Ravish. 2021. *Op.cit.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* Also see: Sherwani, Arfa Khanum. 2021. *The Wire*, "Meet the 85-year-old Famer who Coined the Slogan Har-Har Mahadev, Allah hu Akbar," Meet the 85-Year-Old Farmer Who Coined the Slogan 'Har-Har Mahadev, Allah-Hu-Akbar' - YouTube

<sup>101</sup> Kumar, Ravish. 2021. *Op.cit.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> They refer to BJP's leadership, particularly PM Narendra Modi, the union home minister Amit Shah and the present chief minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath.

<sup>104</sup> Kumar, Ravish. 2021. *Op. cit.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

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system within people so that the two movements: centre to the margins and margins to the centre<sup>106</sup>—can work in tandem to sustain the secular nation-state. Otherwise, both the nation and the state will be susceptible to the exploitation of religious sentiments for electoral or ideological gains. The short, but powerful, inter-faith ritual in the Muzaffarnagar *Mahapanchayat* testifies to the fact that if people consciously unite across religious lines, they can pose a potent challenge to the divisive politics of the government.

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<sup>106</sup> It is popularly referred to as top-bottom approach.

Illustrations:

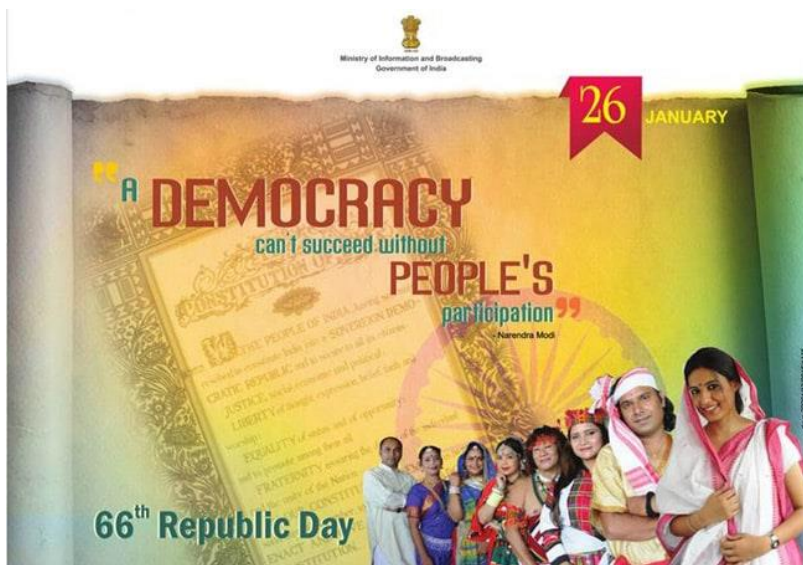


Illustration 1: Government of India's Official Invitation of the 66th Republic Day Celebration<sup>107</sup>

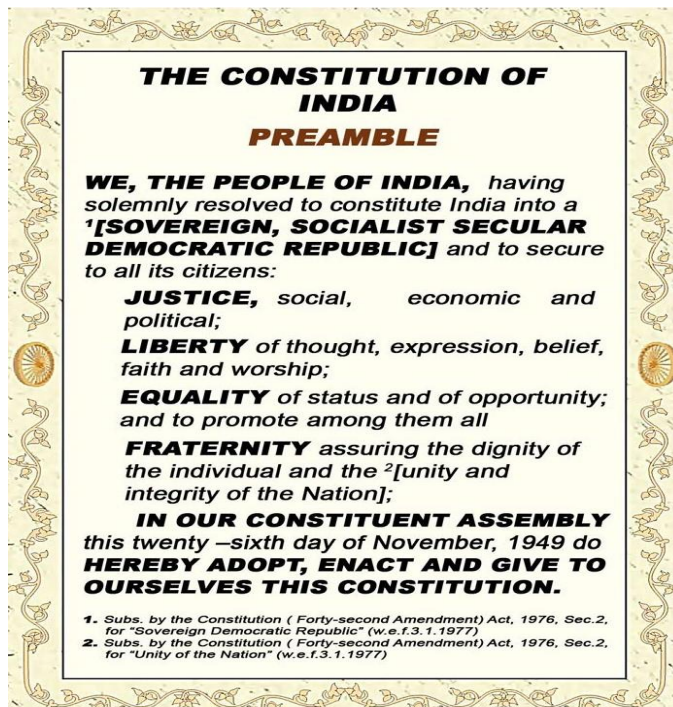
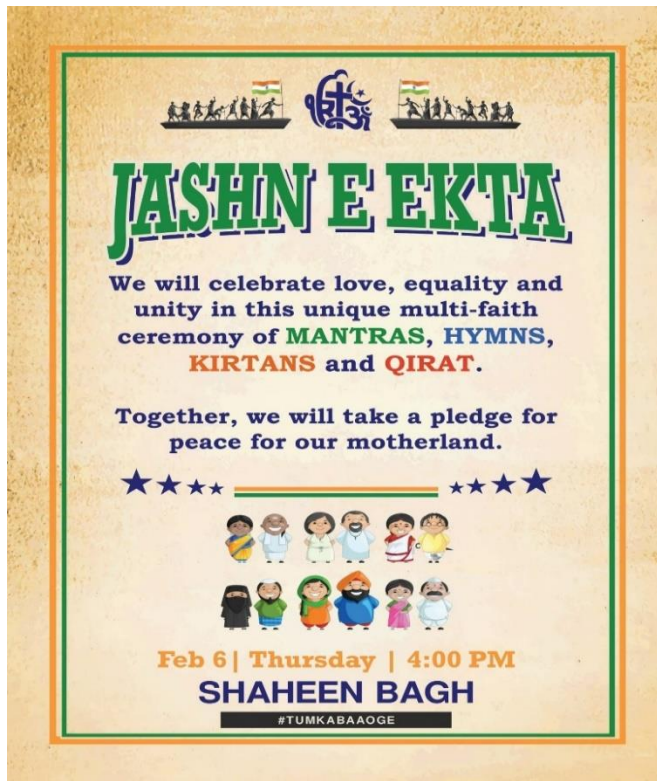


Illustration 2: Preamble of the Constitution of India<sup>108</sup>

<sup>107</sup> [How Has the Secularism Debate Shaped Up Under Modi Sarkar? \(thequint.com\)](https://www.thequint.com)

<sup>108</sup> [Constitution of India Preamble Paper Wall Poster- Multicolour, Medium, Vintage : Amazon.in: Home & Kitchen](https://www.amazon.in)



Illustrion 3: Poster of *Jashn E Ekta* (Inter-Faith Ritual at Shaheen Bagh Protest Site)<sup>109</sup>



Illustration 4: Shaheen Bagh protestors holding the poster of inter-faith ritual during the ritual.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>109</sup> (20) #TumKabAaoge Official on Twitter: "Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Isai Sab yahan aagaye. #TumKabAaoge <https://t.co/WCiY2FfHLD>" / Twitter

<sup>110</sup> Image of Jashnn-E-Ekta. A Multi Faith Prayer Organised in Shaheen Bagh With People From Different Communities For Anti- CAA NRC CAB In Delhi-SP177684-Picxy

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